

# Cohen speaks at Kingsbury High after a student's letter-writing campaign

[Jennifer Pignolet](#), USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee

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The first time 17-year-old Juliana Vilches wrote to her congressman, U.S. Rep. Steve Cohen, it was for a class assignment.

The second time, and third, fourth, fifth — she's lost count — she had something to say.

"I was really mad at that time," Vilches said.

She was mad more hadn't been done to protect so many of her fellow Kingsbury High School students, many of whom were brought to the U.S. as small children, from deportation. Her later letters, she said, were an invitation to come speak to her and her peers about issues important to them.

Cohen heard her. The Memphis Democrat met with students at both Kingsbury and White Station high schools on Tuesday. The discussions focused on immigration and the

gun-control debate, especially in the wake of the shooting at a Parkland, Florida, high school last week that killed 17 people.

"I want to get your ideas," Cohen told the group of about 100 students in the Kingsbury library at the end of their school day.

Students told Cohen, both as individuals and a nodding group, that they felt video games made kids feel like violence was acceptable. Some expressed concern about students with depression, and about access to mental health services.

Cristofer Perez, a junior, asked Cohen what he thinks should happen to people like the accused Parkland shooter. Cohen said while it may be obvious in some cases who committed a crime, the death penalty is concerning because of the possibility of innocence, no matter how remote, as well as biased juries that would disproportionately harm people of color.

The 16-year-old agreed, citing a hope for rehabilitation that could influence others in a positive way.

"I don't think they should face death right away," Cristofer said.

Cohen said students enlightened him on school security issues. A problem with metal detectors, he learned from his meeting at White Station, is they cause students to have to line up for an extended amount of time outside. That could make students a target while huddled together, he said.

Cohen asked if students in the room at Kingsbury would self-identify being part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, authorized by President Barack Obama, that provides temporary legal protection for those brought to the U.S. as young children to work and go to college. About five students stood up.

Cohen lamented the lack of progress in Washington D.C. on a deal to permanently protect those under DACA, known as "Dreamers."

"We're kind of at a stalemate right now," Cohen said.

But he tried to assuage fears of deportation, at least for Dreamers.

"I want to assure you, I don't think it's going to happen," Cohen said.

That prompted the school's principal, Terry Ross, to chime in with concern for the parents of Dreamers, who do not have the same protection as their children.

"We want to make sure we keep families whole," Ross said.

About a quarter of Kingsbury's students, he said, were born outside the U.S. Anxiety about deportation often causes families to keep students home from school, he said, and he has to convince them to return. Parents at the school have given their children contingency plans for what to do if they arrive home and the parents are gone because federal agents have arrested them.

Juliana, who invited Cohen to the school, said she was "a bit shocked" that Cohen came to Kingsbury.

"I think it's very powerful and moving, mainly for us," she said of herself and her fellow Latino students.

Cohen said he never thought of Juliana's letters as sounding angry.

"I thought it was a very nice invitation," he said.

Reach Jennifer Pignolet at [jennifer.pignolet@commercialappeal.com](mailto:jennifer.pignolet@commercialappeal.com) or on Twitter [@JenPignolet](https://twitter.com/JenPignolet).